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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experiences of a non-technologically oriented composition instructor who began a writing course that incorporated online computer technology. Following the Northridge (California) earthquake in 1994, the administration at California State University Northridge (CSUN) recognized the importance of creating electronic gateways to education. The paper provides anecdotes and Zen stories about the online instruction experiences of the instructor of English 406, Advanced Expository Writing for Teachers. The "technologically challenged" writing instructor prepared for the class by collaborating with a group of other instructors who were implementing online courses, reading about the Internet, joining listservs focused on the Internet and teaching, surfing the Internet looking for sites to show the class, and creating a class web page, and converting materials and notes from the traditional class to the online class. The paper looks at the numerous problems encountered in the first semester the course was offered, and ways the course was changed for the second time it was offered. Suggestions are offered for others who may find themselves in similar circumstances are also offered. (SWC)

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Zen and the Art of Online Teaching: Reflections of a Technologically Challenged Writing Instructor

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ZEN AND THE ART OF ONLINE TEACHING: REFLECTIONS OF A TECHNOLOGICALLY CHALLENGED WRITING INSTRUCTOR

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ABSTRACT

I borrow my title from Robert Pirsig's book for our similarities in purpose. Just as he proposes that Orthodox Zen has little to do with his novel, so too do I admit that it has little to do with this paper. But Zen, "a special teaching without scriptures" (*Zen Stories* 3) does impose meditative order. And in some larger sense, my journey from the traditional classroom through two semesters of online teaching does mirror an eastern philosophy which, as it did for Pirsig, guided me to an awakening, to find an *exit from a cage* I didn't even realize was around me. This paper contains my Zen stories, a collection of anecdotes which describe why a non-technologically oriented *composition* instructor would teach a course that embraces computer technology. It also looks at the problems I encountered and offers some suggestions for others who may find themselves on a similar path seeking enlightenment.

INTRODUCTION, OR WHAT IS THE BARRIER OF A PATRIARCH. THE MU [*no* thing] (*The Gateless Gate* 89)

During February and March the OCC-L has been engaged in a lively debate on technical support for distance students. The debate seems to revolve around two questions: (1) Should students be required to take an introductory computer/Internet skills course through the computer department before taking other courses that incorporate computers in their delivery? (2) How much technical support should we expect in courses not connected with computer departments? Although group members seem equally divided on the prerequisite issue, they concur in their wish that students know *some* basic computer skills before taking courses such as English, history, social sciences, et.al. which incorporate computer technology.

These issues are not new. Whenever educators decide to teach a course online, they use E-mail, join educational discussion groups, and ask the same questions which often include an admission such as the one Michael Seymour confessed to recently on the WWWDEV listserv "that [he has] limited knowledge of the technology and find[s] that to be the biggest challenge to date" (17 February 1997). But while the

find[s] that to be the biggest challenge to date" (17 February 1997). But while the ensuing discussions offer solutions, they also suggest the tenacity of the problems--problems which seem like those annoying little nails on the highway that grip our tires, letting the air slowly seep out, unbeknownst to us, until suddenly we're forced to pull off to the side of the road.

Despite a growing familiarity with the technology, I, too, was forced to stop. But my forced stop occurred well after I thought I had adapted to the new technology. While teaching English 406, Advanced Expository Writing for Teachers online for the first time at California State University Northridge (CSUN), I was so busy trying to get *through* the course, that I didn't see what was happening *in* the course. But at the semester's end, student evaluations of the class, while positive, suggested that the technology, not the writing, had become the course focus. My students' technology needs caught me up in techno-gridlock; the technology ended up driving my class rather than enhancing it. Exhausted and frustrated, I did not consider this shortcoming until I was asked to take my course online again and found myself forced to look back over my first experience teaching in cyberspace.

Perhaps my reflections as a technologically challenged writing instructor caught up in this new techno-academe might help others. I invite you to share my journey as I travel back down that road.

BACKGROUND, OR IT IS TOO CLEAR AND SO IT IS HARD TO SEE. (*The Gateless Gate* 96)

I teach English and have taught it for 16 years. I even taught English composition in a campus computer lab for many years, showing students how to collaborate with each other and write using word processing programs. And, although I didn't quite "coast on yesteryears handouts..." (Killian, 15 February 1997) I did adopt a somewhat complacent approach toward using the technology. But that attitude quickly changed one early January morning, and, just as the subtitle in Pirsig's book suggests for the author, so too did I begin my *Inquiry Into Values.*

THE FIRST AWAKENING, OR LIGHTNING FLASHES/SPARKS SHOWER/IN ONE BLINK.../YOU HAVE MISSED SEEING. (*The Gateless Gate* 107)

January 17, 1994. 4:31 a.m. The Northridge Earthquake. On this cataclysmic morning, amid the physical devastation and personal trauma, CSUN, already moving along the ramp to the information super highway, picked up speed and started zooming down it to the 21st century. As the dust settled, the University revved itself up to make sure that the campus opened quickly. Faced with the loss of buildings, it moved classrooms and computer labs into temporary trailers and tremendous circus-like metal domes. And, anticipating a decreased student population as the University's commuter population began to rebuild highways and

homes, the Administration recognized the importance of creating electronic gateways to education.

THE SECOND AWAKENING, OR ONE SHOULD NOT DISCUSS A DREAM/IN FRONT OF A SIMPLETON. (*The Gateless Gate* 94)

Dr. John Hartzog, Director of the Learning Resource Center, decided his unit would be the vehicle to lead the way. And since I am part of that unit, he made me one of its designated drivers. First, John directed me to create an online writing center. Then, he created the magnificent *Cyber*seven, seven faculty--including me--all from different departments and charged each of us with teaching a course online, and ultimately, with becoming prototypes for the rest of the University community.

"But I teach *English* ," I cried, as I listened to the computer literates in the group organizing their direction. Links, lynx, E-mail, gifs, HyperNews, mIRC, MOO--these words were not in my repertoire. I'm familiar with rhetoric, writing pedagogy, Burke, Focault--but html, *not.*

"You can do it," Dr Hartzog said, "with a little help from your friends."

"You can do it," my new friends chimed in."

THE THIRD AWAKENING, OR A HUNDRED HEARINGS CANNOT SURPASS ONE SEEING....(*The Gateless Gate* 113)

So, from my comfortable role as composition instructor in an established computer composition classroom, I found myself lost in cyberspace. Those once elusive foreign terms became part of my *need to know*, yet still largely uncharted vocabulary. The first six months after the earthquake, I read about the Internet and I joined listservs that focused on the Internet and teaching. The next six months, with the help of the writing center consultants whom I direct, I *surfed* the net--a strange thing to do on a Super Information *highway*, seeking sites to link from our homepage. Sean Burke, a former CSUN student, now enrolled in the doctorate program at Northwestern University, set up a few web pages for me and taught me how to replicate and maintain them by rote.

Each day, I spent more and more chunks of time in front of the computer. The potential of the Internet as a teaching tool captured my imagination. I began to believe, as Fred Decker says that "using new technology with enthusiasm can engage the interest of students and fire them up" (15 February 1997). And Nancy Sulla on the EDTECH list confirms the ideas I had that "...computers CAN/MIGHT affect learning but it's not in the computers it's in the teachers' perceptions of the computers..." (7 March 1997). "This stuff isn't so tough," I thought, and "I'm enthusiastic. Take a class online? No problem."

FOURTH AWAKENING, OR CONTROLLED OR NOT CONTROLLED?/...BOTH ARE A GRIEVOUS ERROR (*The Gateless Gate* 92)

During all this time, I continued to meet regularly with the Cyberseven. As they talked about putting their own classes online, I sat and listened. Much of the jargon still befuddled me, but at least the words sounded less foreign. From time to time, I even contributed to the discussions. Most amazing, I established sound working relationships with people outside my own department: Ben Attias, Speech Communication; Shelia Harbet, Health Science; Carlos Maldonado, Music; Bamdad Samii, Math; Jerry Schutte, Sociology; and Steven Stepanek, Computer Science. (Ah yes, we did have our one "official" technical wizard.)

And from these relationships I learned what it would take to get my course up and running. Because I still had some trepidations, despite my confidence, I decided that I would meet more in the classroom than in cyberspace, alternating three weeks on, three off over a 15 week semester. I talked to the English Department Chair to make sure my course would be footnoted in the schedule of classes as a "partially" online course. I put a course description online, as well as left hard-copy handouts with the department secretary. I spent hours surfing the Web. I lurked on listservs. I linked the course up to software students could download free. I discovered hundreds of useful education sites that I would share with my class full of potential writing teachers.

I learned how to download and upload. I linked the course up to sites that would teach my students to do the same. I learned how to make frames and copy gifs. And when I needed to know more, I asked for help--from the cyberseven, from the student techies who worked in the Learning Resource Center Computer Lab, from the people at the CSUN Computer Center.

And as Crawford Kilian did when he started his first online course, I looked at the materials and notes from my traditional class and "convert[ed] word-processed handouts into textfiles, slap[ped] em up...and carr[ied] on (9 March 1997). I would create the perfect environment; the students would have all the information they needed, literally at their fingertips. I also made some assumptions. I assumed that a class full of current and future teachers would be able to learn everything they needed to know about technology for this course just as I did. I also assumed that since the schedule of classes indicated the class would be partially online, students who already used computers would sign up for the course. Plus, since I put *everything* in place for them, I didn't expect these current and future teachers to have any major problems. Little ones, perhaps, but I was sure I could handle those, especially since I planned to meet with my students face-to-face for the first two classes.

FIFTH AWAKENING, OR ENLIGHTENMENT ALWAYS COMES AFTER THE ROAD

OF THINKING IS BLOCKED (*The Gateless Gate* 89)

The first night of class I pushed my way through the mass of students hanging out the door, all clamoring "Professor Rubenstein, Professor Rubenstein, I need to add your class."

"Wonderful," I thought. All these students want to add an online course. "What enthusiasm, what dedication. Wow."

But as the din died down, I began to hear another story. One that began, "I *have* to have this class; it's required" and ended with, "this is a *what* kind of class?" One belligerent student even argued with me that there wasn't a footnote in the schedule of classes until another student who came prepared to take an online course pulled out his copy of the schedule. "Well, I didn't see it," retorted the aggrieved student.

I didn't despair--yet, nor did I groan in resignation when we went to the computer lab and I heard a chorus of "how do you turn this thing on?" And, "I turned it on, so how come nothing's on the screen?" (Honest, I did tell them where the on switches for the hardrive and the screen were!)

After 3 hours explaining and then explaining again how to log on to get an E-mail account, introducing search engines on the Internet, and showing how to post to HyperNews, I hoarsely whispered goodnight to the students, and handed a pen over to those who stuck with the class and wanted to add.

I almost made a u-turn off the Superhighway the next week because I forgot about the University's automated touch tone registration (TTR) system which allows students to call in to add or drop classes without a professor's signature. Subsequently, the next week, I pushed through another traffic jam to get into the room. I had added those students who sat through the first class and the University added those who were lucky to get in through TTR when some of last week's students dropped. Again, we marched down to the computer lab where I repeated the same instructions as I had the week before, and heard the same complaints.

Unfortunately, the questions and complaints never stopped repeating themselves. Or so it seemed to me. For the rest of the semester, I felt as if I were on one of those never-ending round-abouts that you find in England, the ones which keep you going round and round in a circle, trying but never quite succeeding to inch off into a transit road.

No matter what I did to try to make the course more accessible, it wasn't enough. Trouble with E-mail and the Internet. *No problem.* I gave continuing mini-lessons during real and virtual office hours. Difficulty checking the syllabus and finding assignments online? *No problem.* I printed the information out, copied it and handed it out when we met in class.

Talk in a chat room? " What for?" one student asked. "Since so many of us don't have computers at home, we have to use the campus lab. Kind of silly to sit next to

each other and talk with a computer."

And those who did have computers? Seems as if they all bought them from the same big warehouse. Sure, the machines had the latest software--most of which students still don't even know they have--but none came with full programs, none came with information about the software, and none gave working phone numbers for hotlines. ISP's could have been wasps for all these students knew--AOL and Prodigy came installed on the computers so that's what the students insisted they had to use--damn the expense and damn the problems. I was there, after all, to answer the questions. I was the professor, wasn't I?

And I felt the intellectual's need to answer questions. Some were easy. A few weeks into the course, a student phoned the office complaining that she couldn't post to the course HyperNews page by telnetting into the campus server. When I asked her why she wasn't using Netscape, she told me she didn't have Netscape on her brand new Windows 95 computer. So I asked what icons she did see; she mentioned one called "my desktop." Aha. "Click on it and tell me what you do see." She had an "Internet" icon--problem solved.

Another time a student couldn't understand why her E-mail to me kept getting bounced back. I asked her to write out my address *exactly* as she put it in the To: space, I saw: http://www.csun.irubenstein@csun.edu.

But some questions were difficult for me, particularly those concerning modems. I felt deflated when I couldn't find the answers even after seeking technical help.

At this point you probably expect the epiphany, the anecdotal class turn-around. Sorry. Despite the mini-lessons, and the handouts, despite all the extra time, I got caught in techno-gridlock. Somehow, my *writing* class disappeared. I was so caught up in making the technology work for my students, that by the last night of class I would have roared *YES* to Russell Hunt's recent questions. "Suppose," he begins, "...lots of people come [to class] knowing E-mail, but have never seen a GUI and find them incomprehensible? People who've surfed the net, but have never pasted text from one window application to another? Are they precluded from taking that class?" (15 February, 1997)

I'd never had a class that I didn't walk away from feeling elated until this one. I cajoled, I pampered, I fawned, I joked. The students still wrote, and wrote lots. They still turned in writing portfolios, and they still did their oral presentations. But my traditional approach to writing tasks in an electronic medium seemed to keep us off balance for most of the semester. And although I ardently believed that E-mail, HyperNews, IRC and other forms of public speech would develop fluency, the students weren't quite as successful as I hoped. Why not? I had to wonder. After all, I gave them the "continuing encouragement that Crawford Kilian suggests "relatively uncommitted or unconfident" students in these classes need "if they're to stay in the course and thrive" (23 February 1997). I was so exhausted, and I couldn't (or didn't want to) think about why. I simply needed to put on the brakes. I never wanted to hear the words "teach online" again. But a few events occurred

which prodded me back onto the Superhighway.

SIXTH AWAKENING, OR WHEN YOU MEET OTHERS, SAY ONLY A PART OF WHAT YOU INTEND/NEVER GIVE THE WHOLE THING AT ONCE. (*The Gateless Gate* 117)

For one, John Hartzog requested that I teach another class. "After all," he said, "you did the hard part, now you need only revise to correct the flaws." I didn't quite buy his argument, but he's supported my endeavors many times, so I figured I owed him.

The Cyberseven had been meeting regularly, mostly to talk about our new server, software upgrades, web forms, and, in general, computer stuff. But now we met for a post-semester assessment discussion. Since John wanted us to teach again the following semester, we pooled our problems and worked through solutions. (I had been too engrossed in my own problems to realize that even those who knew the technology had problems.)

I discovered, for instance, that I could put a special code on my class that would not allow students to add the class without my permission. The campus Technology Center listened to our complaints about the problems students encountered trying to log on to get an account, especially when an entire class did so at once. Although continuing students still use the log in procedure, new students automatically are given accounts when they enrol. Most important, I secured a student computer lab assistant to help my class with their computer problems, so that I could focus on the writing.

Sharing my experiences with others from local community colleges and universities, and listening to other versions of the same stories reminded me about the difficulties inherent in learning any new technology. It also reminded me that we can't take anything for granted. Although the automobile's original 35 mile per hour speed frightened most people, today nobody thinks twice about revving up to 65 miles per hour--or more-- on the freeway. Yet, even now, when I buy a new car and get behind the steering wheel for the first time, my hands shake and my stomach churns; I don't quite get up the courage to go more than 35 miles per hour--at least for the first day.. Likewise for the telephone . Although I use it frequently--despite my addiction to E-mail-- I remember how strange making a phone call seemed in Europe. How foolish I felt when people lined up to use the telephone, patiently waiting until I figured out where to put the money, and how to ring up my party.

I also paid more attention to listserv discussions. As I followed similar threads on different lists, I began to notice a common conclusion about the technology. It changes, and it changes quickly. When we use the technology in our classes, we need to recognize, as Eric Crump has noted, that the problems are not simple nor easy to solve (15 February 1997). Like a mantra, this idea reverberated and freed me up to refocus my energy on what I know I do well--teach writing.

SEVENTH AWAKENING, OR EVERYWHERE IT GOES THE TRUE TEACHING WILL BE SPREAD.(*The Gateless Gate* 125)

The incident, however, that finally put me back on the road came in the form of an E-mail communication from a student in that abysmal course:

> Ilene: I wanted to express my enjoyment in your class. I know that I didn't do too well and never finished the bibliography but that's okay. I really benefited immensely from the class. I understand it was an experiment and things didn't go too well, but I found it very valuable. I intend to use the thin you demonstrated...and I wanted you to know I enjoyed it more than all of the other classes I took....Thanks....
> (Skramstad, 14 January 1997)

So I traveled back through my course, and threw out those techniques--technological and rhetorical--that didn't work. I got rid of the glitzy web page gifs that took forever to load, and dumped frames which were difficult for my students to maneuver. I created new pages that were somewhat more linear, easier to follow, yet had connections from multiple sites to the most often used information the students would need to access.

I allowed time for the technology. I tied the writing to the technology, not as an entity apart from it. The first night of my new online class, I asked the students to write down the one question they needed to have answered by the end of the evening. I collected the writing, and sent the students down to the computer lab--without me--where a student lab assistant was waiting to help them get to the course home page and the scavenger hunt I developed to take them through the course and the World Wide Web.

I went to my office and read their inquiries. Putting like questions together, I discovered some basic refrains on grading, number of papers, time in cyberspace and reading assignments. Normally, when students raise the questions, they don't really hear the similarities, or even my responses, or even remember the answers. Subsequently, questions at the beginning of a new class are very time-consuming

When we reconvened in the classroom at the end of the night, I listened to the jabbering about what they had accomplished. And, when I read the four basic questions, the students themselves answered them. So the scavenger hunt not only acquainted them with the Internet in a non-threatening way (read as --no instructor present) and directed them to look at the course description and requirements as they wouldn't have done had I handed them hard copies, it also reinforced the idea that I would direct them toward learning, but they would be responsible for their own learning.

The first night zoomed by. Indeed, this semester seems to be flying. And while the computer technology problems continue to intrude, the students seem more willing to deal with them, or at least to share the responsibility for overcoming them with me. One student recently wrote:

> Finally at 10:30 tonight (Sunday) I got connected to LAUSDnet, then got online through Microsoft Internet Explorer. Check ou my HyperNews postings, one in section 4 and two in section 5! Life seems so much easier now....Just thought I'd let you know how happy I am right now....Chris (Martinez, 10 March 1997)

CONCLUSION, OR

> **In spring, hundreds of flowers; in autumn, a harvest moon;**
> **In summer, a refreshing breeze; in winter snow will accompany you.**
> **If useless things do not hang in your mind,**
> **Any season is a good season for you. (*The Gateless Gate* 106)**

And so, in a sense the end is a beginning: I teach English and have taught it for 16 years...perhaps with the exception of one small semester.

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